



Group Wants 'Justice for Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries'

By Julie Stahl

Victoria Abda was desperate to save her husband from the hangman's noose when she knocked on the door of Saddam Hussein's house in Baghdad in 1969, her daughter Lydia Sasson told Cybercast News Service.

Meir Abda and his brother Sasson were among the wealthy elite in Baghdad, but as Jews, they came under the systematic persecution that befell hundreds of thousands of Jews across the Middle East after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

Meir and Sasson, accused of spying for the Jewish state, were released from prison after three years, and by 1973, Lydia, her six siblings and her parents had fled Iraq one by one, leaving all their material goods behind.

A Jewish advocacy group insists that stories like Abda's -- about Jews forced to flee Arab countries across the Middle East following the creation of the State of Israel - should be considered at the planned Israeli-Palestinian peace conference that's supposed to take place in Annapolis, Md., later this month.

When the issue of Palestinian refugees comes up, so should the issue of Jewish refugees - it's only fair, said the New York-based group called *Justice for Jews from Arab Countries*.

JJAC is pressing to have the plight of Jewish refugees included on the agenda at the upcoming conference, said Stanley Urman, executive director of the organization. (See Earlier Story)

"[The international community] is preoccupied with the plight of the Palestinian refugees," Urman told *Cybercast News Service* in a telephone interview.

Arab States say their Jewish citizens were well-treated and not forcibly expelled from their countries. But in fact, the Arab League did use Jewish citizens as a political weapon in their struggle against the fledgling State of Israel, Urman said.

Urman said the truth must be told - that the number of Jewish refugees from Arab countries who were absorbed by Israel is about equal to the number of Palestinian refugees who fled the land that is now Israel. Without truth and justice there can be no reconciliation, Urman said.

An estimated 856,000 Jewish refugees fled 10 Arab countries - Aden, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen -- compared with the 726,000 Palestinian refugees who fled Israeli territory. The number of Palestinian refugees has swelled to millions over the years because their descendants are included in the count.

The JJAC this week released a report, "Justice for Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries: The Case for Rights and Redress." It contains documents recently discovered in the United Nations archives revealing Arab collusion and laws enacted to persecute the Jewish people.

The report reveals "a pattern of state-sanctioned oppression of Jewish refugees from Arab countries - including Nuremberg-like laws," said Irwin Cotler, an international human rights lawyer, Canadian parliamentarian and former Canadian justice minister.

According to the JJAC, the text of the Arab League draft law says that "...all Jews -- with the exception of citizens of non-Arab countries -- were to be considered members of the Jewish 'minority state of Palestine'; their bank accounts would be frozen and used to finance resistance to 'Zionist ambitions in Palestine'; Jews believed to be active Zionists would be interned as political prisoners and their assets confiscated; only Jews who accept service in Arab armies or place themselves at the disposal of these armies would be considered 'Arabs.'"

In New York this past weekend, 50 delegates from ten countries and five US cities -- representing 35 Jewish communities and organizations -- participated in a JJAC summit meeting.

In his presentation to the group, Dr. Cotler disclosed the "pernicious and prejudicial role played by the U.N. in excluding the issue of Jewish refugees from Arab countries from the overall "justice and peace agenda."

Even back in 1948, the United Nations ignored warnings that Jews in Arab lands faced "extreme and imminent danger," the JJAC report said.

"The time has come to return Jewish refugees from Arab countries to the Middle East narrative from which they been expunged these past sixty years," Cotler said. "This is not just a case of justice delayed, but justice denied. Indeed, the displacement of 850,000 Jews from Arab countries is not just a 'Forgotten Exodus' but a 'Forced Exodus.'"

The issue of the so-called right of return for hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees and millions of their descendants is one of the thorniest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Palestinians insist that they must be allowed to return to homes and lands they fled under pressure from Arab leaders in the 1940s that are now inside Israel. But even the most dovish Israelis agree that the return of the Palestinians would destroy the Jewish state demographically.

Unlike the Palestinian refugees, the Jews who fled their homes in Arab countries have no desire to return and are not seeking personal reparations. But the JJAC hopes the Israeli government will use their plight as a lever to force a more equitable solution for Israel to the problem of the Palestinian refugees.

It is not clear if the Israeli government will take advantage of the information, however. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert reportedly told the JJAC that any discussion of the Jewish refugee issue was premature.

(The Jerusalem Post reported on Thursday that the Palestinians may be willing to accept a partial agreement on the refugee issue - "if Israel will allow entrance to 100,000 refugees over a period of 10 years," the newspaper said, citing an Israeli intelligence document.)